Jason was bored. The warm sun flowing through the window onto his half asleep form made him want to go back to sleep and the thought of waking up and walking around with nothing to do depressed him. Nevertheless, he wasn't tired and he couldn't sleep anymore so he awakened fully, sat up on the edge of the bed and stamped his feet against the floor to relieve their numbness. Outside all was the same as he had left it.

"Here, we are beyond time and beyond space," Tom had said.

"He had the time part right," Jason thought.

Days passed. Morning after glorious morning, sunset after glorious sunset faded into each other until Jason lost all sense of time. This made him edgy.

The first few days after Tom and Janey left, Jason was happy and content, some new vista or rush of released tension settling him into comfort. Then, the boredom came, creeping, like a twilight whose weakening contrast slowly erases forms, leaving only misty, unidentifiable images as it fades into night. It was horrible.

Jason stood up, stretched, and went to the window. The cabin was messy. Tom and Janey must have worked like madmen to keep it as neat as they had. After they left, Jason attempted to maintain the established standard, but with the boredom came a lessening energy, so the house cluttered, the yard overgrew, and except for a little rut Jason wore inside and outside the house, all was covered with the dull detritus of disuse.

He looked out across the breathtaking beauty of the hills and sighed as the vibrant vales before him changed into a lifeless tableau, and his solitude swept him, and his boredom, into a selfish, pitiful loneliness.

He thought about Marie, glad she wasn't here.

He went back to the Prison several times to watch Marie. As far as he could tell, she was happy. Then a curious thing happened. He lost sight of her, gradually becoming unable to differentiate her from the others. It was never easy to tell inmates apart because they were all, virtually, the same. They dressed alike, walked alike, talked alike, even laughed the same way, and so it was, one day, as he was looking directly at

Marie, she wasn't Marie; then for a moment she was again, then she wasn't, then she was lost to him forever in a sea of indistiguishable faces.

He remembered another time, when he was staring at the Prison, he saw Pick, one of the inmates. (Jason knew his name was Pick without having known it. As Tom said, it wasn't exactly mind reading but it was as good a term as any for what was happening.) Jason knew Pick's name was Pick and he also knew Pick would soon come through the "wall."

Day after day Jason watched Pick and day after day Pick became more unlike the others. Individual mannerisms emerged, setting him distinctly apart. Even his hair changed color. Sure enough, after a while, Pick came through the wall.

The first night, Pick seemed to be on the edge of panic, spending the entire time standing in one place. Jason thought about what to do. Tom had told Jason someday he would pass the cabin on to another so Jason thought he would help Pick to the cabin, tell Pick the same things Tom had told him, then be off on another adventure. In the morning Jason approached Pick.

"Hello friend," said Jason.

Pick jumped to his feet ready for battle.

"Whoa, easy. I've come to help out. Pick, right?"

What happened next had so astonished Jason he still shook his head in disbelief. Pick threw a punch at him. Jason ducked and no harm came from it, but Pick meant it, and if it had connected Jason would have been knocked unconscious. Then Pick ran away, never looking back, flight reducing him to a speck on the horizon until he vanished. Dumbfounded, Jason never went to the Prison again.

This afternoon, as he stood gazing through the window feeling bored and lonely, he also felt confused. Why, when all around him nature's dance played, while the wind in the grass and the trees made everything sway in time to an unheard tune, and the dappled light on the cabin wall changed in repeating patterns of gold, white, and yellow, why did Jason feel only longing loneliness, blinding boredom, and a vast, dark silence? A somber silence choking all utterance, not a tranquil quiet but a stupor so complete it seemed it could marshal the very air into stasis, perfect and endless.

That's why the simple sound of another's voice exploded the quiet like a thunderclap.

"Hey, Jase!"

Jason spun around frantically looking for the source of the voice. The room was empty. He ran to the back of the cabin and looked out the window. Nothing.

"Jase, you in there?"

Jason ran back to the front window and looked out. Stillness. Then a loud banging on the door as it slowly opened from without.

He was old, but moved in a manner that was ageless, standing perfectly straight, walking easily and lightly through the doorway, his countenance venerable.

"Sorry to bother you. I'm Johnson. You didn't hear me?"

Jason stuttered.

"Well, yes, I heard you...but I..."

"Great! Good! That's important...that you heard me. I came about the garden."

He was dressed in khakis and brown work boots and had snowy white hair, deep brown eyes and dark brown, almost black, skin. Johnson strode to the back window and motioned for Jason to come look.

"I been watchin' it for awhile. I figured I'd come help if you need it. Well, I mean, I know you need it but...so, uh, come on out here a sec." Johnson walked out the back door. Jason warily followed.

"Are you...do you...," Jason couldn't think of what to say.

"That's my place," said Johnson pointing to a small cabin on a distant hillside. Jason had seen the hillside a thousand times, had studied every part of it so he knew every blade of grass and every bend in every stick on every centimeter of ground. He had never seen the house.

"I've...never...seen that...," said Jason. In his amazement he spoke slowly and deliberately.

"Yeah, I know. It's a kind of Prison thing. You know, you don't see it then you do see it. Like that. But I've been there...and I've been watchin' the Garden."

Jason had not seen a garden either. Natural vegetation surrounded his house, most of the growth sturdy and healthy, but there was no sign of a formal garden. There was no sign of an informal garden.

"You gettin' bored?" Johnson asked. "I mean in general. Not now."

Jason nodded.

"That's usually it." Johnson began walking slowly and purposefully as he spoke. Occasionally he stooped, picked up a plant or a rock, examined it, put it back down and resumed his walking.

"Tom and Janey had this place growin' well. Pretty. Very pretty."

Johnson disappeared behind a small clump of bushes. They rustled as he spoke.

"You haven't been out here for while, right? If you want, you can start with these." He broke something from the bush.

Johnson walked back to Jason with a small branch and handed it to Jason. The branch and leaves were scruffy, drab, and dry.

"See," Johnson pointed to the branch. "This's s'pose to be blue. Sort of blue-green. Like fire close to the log." Johnson waited for a reaction but Jason was still, awestruck, speechless. Johnson continued:

"Go to work in this Garden. Right now, you're bored. Pretty soon you'll get lonely. Now that you see my house...maybe come by, have a little somethin' to eat now and then, and I'll help out with the gardening."

"Wait a minute. Wait. Johnson, I don't know what you're talking about. I don't have a garden. I..."

Johnson started to speak but Jason kept on.

"...no, no wait, I'm not finished. I am bored. I'm frightened too. I don't know who you are. I never saw your house until now...and believe me I have looked and looked around here for another house. And I don't see any garden or anything or...I don't know...who ARE you?"

Johnson took the branch back out of Jason's hand and put it in his own shirt pocket.

"I'm your neighbor. House is right there and has been for a while. Hey, there's a lot of houses around. You'll see. And all this..." he waved his hand across the back yard, "this is a garden."

Jason looked at the ground and shook his head. Johnson looked at him with compassion.

"OK, I'll get out of here. Maybe you're not ready." Johnson said, heading back into the house and through to the front door. Johnson called out without looking back, "...but if you feel like it, start with that bush I showed you."

Johnson held up the small branch he had put in his shirt pocket. It was glowing with a blue-green light illuminating Johnson's hand.

"It'll look like this when you're done." As he tossed it on the front porch, it twirled merrily in the air, landing with a bounce and, with that, Johnson turned, gone from sight. Jason heard him call out.

"Come over any time you want. I'll help however I can."

Jason walked through his house to the front porch where the small branch lay on the wooden boards, glowing...but not as a light glows. The leaves were vivid, lucent, blue-green, exciting the colors of everything around them; the wood floorboards the branch lay on, suffused by the light, adopted their subtle sheen. No, it was definitely not a light. It was some other kind of glow, and it was captivating. Jason bent down to get a closer look, and as he came closer, the leaves seemed to sharpen slightly into focus, becoming clearer, more vibrant. Jason picked up the branch and detected a slight aroma as he brought it to his nose. Suddenly, the aroma filled his sense, becoming palpable, exquisite, and as he ran his fingers through the soft and supple leaves, even more intense, almost overwhelming.

Jason looked through the cabin to the back yard where the bush was growing. It didn't seem possible this branch had come from that dull, brownish, brittle plant. Jason walked toward it, glancing quickly back and forth between the branch and bush in continual comparison, the bush fragile and sickly, the branch strong and alive. He bent down to smell one of the clusters of leaves on the bush but when he touched them they crumbled, dry and dead, falling to the ground. There was no aroma. He smelled the small branch he was still holding, again finding the same remarkable scent. Whatever perfume the branch contained, whatever life to make it so radiant, was not present in the bush.

He knew he needed Johnson. What a fool he was to let him walk away. Jason grabbed a coat, stuffed the branch in his pocket and darted down the hill in the direction of Johnson's house. It was a direction he had never gone before.

Chapter Two

The sun was setting, ribbons of long shadows rippled over the countryside and on the ground ahead of him as he walked, stars shone beside the high noctilucent clouds, their purple and red marbling the cyan sundown sky, and evening's breath caressed him with an innervating coolness.

Jason was walking down a gentle hillside along an arroyo that emptied into a creek fed by an upland spring. Jason had seen the arroyo running with water after early morning rains and imagined the creek that it ultimately fed to be quite large, perhaps even a river, though he had never seen it. Tonight the arroyo was dry. Beyond it, Jason saw a large rock outcropping near Johnson's cabin, made a dead reckon, and headed toward it.

Quickly it was night and all was dark except for the starlight that laid a luminous, blue-white outline on the forms it touched, making it possible for Jason to progress. He entered dense foliage that crowded thicker with each step, becoming close, compact, and soon created a canopy that obscured the sky, leaving the shadowed outline of the rock outcropping as his only beacon. Jason could barely see the edge of the path he was on. Fear crept in, fear of the dark.

Jason had first felt the fear outside the Prison. It terrified him, for his sense was not of a transparent dark with goblins haunting the gloaming, but a thick, cloistering, Cimmerian darkness overtaking him as if to smother or capture him, a feeling not so much of the absence of light as of the presence of evil. Jason forced himself along. In the distance the faint shape of the rock he was navigating towards assured him he wasn't lost, keeping him from panic. He looked up to the rock and kept his eyes on it. He stumbled several times but resisted the temptation to look down, keeping his eyes on his objective. Progress was slow, but it was progress.

Gradually starlight reappeared, the cool calm night spread above him, the fear subsided, and Jason emerged from the overgrowth. He was standing at the edge of a small clearing with Johnson's house in front of him.

As he drew closer he noticed the curious detail of the house. It wasn't like his cabin in any way, made instead of a material that resembled wood but was not wood, a simple box, with a gabled roof that had no overhang. The house was monolithic. No seams or details of construction connected the separate elements, only smooth surfaces. The windows, yellow light streaming from them, were seamless where they joined the walls. The front door was stranger still. A small indentation outlined a rectangle where a door might be, but with no visible hinges or handles.

"Hello the house!" he called.

There was no answer.

"Johnson, it's me, Jason."

Jason reached out to knock but the door instantly and silently disappeared, leaving an open doorway where the door had been. Someone stood there smiling. Jason thought for a second it was Johnson but he didn't look much like the man he had seen at the cabin. Startled, stupefied, Jason looked at the door jamb.

"Wanna see that again?" the person asked.

The door reappeared noiselessly, then quickly disappeared.

"Don't ask. You'll learn. Come in."

"Johnson?" Jason asked.

"Yeah, yeah. Come on in. It's OK."

Jason stepped in. No threshold. The floor was level with the ground, perfectly smooth, and made of the same wood-like material that wasn't wood. Inside, the house was stunning. It had one huge room, appearing much bigger inside than outside, with many rooms off it, and stairs leading to a second story. Jason had seen no second story from outside.

Johnson was wearing something draped around him as if it were a robe but there didn't seem to be any material, only a type of incandescence, with colors of the sunset dancing around Johnson's form, ever shifting in intensity and hue and making the light on Johnson's face shift and shimmer like light reflected from rippling water. Jason could see through all the magical light play that it was, indeed, Johnson. The whole effect was extraordinary.

Johnson, of course, knew all this.

"I was tryin' some, well, you know...ahem...I better...I'll be right back," he said.

And then Johnson disappeared. Simply, instantly, and completely...he vanished.

Jason couldn't concentrate. What happened with the door, then with Johnson's clothes, defied all his logic and belief systems, but now these mental processes froze. He stood silently, motionless and mystified.

In seconds, Johnson reappeared, dressed in khakis.

"Sit down, sit down," said Johnson, crossing his legs and sitting on a carpet on the floor. He patted the space across from him. The carpets and flooring were solid and supported him sturdily when standing but became exceedingly pliant as he sat. The floor was soft like a sofa.

"I'm a little...how did you disappear like that?"

"I shouldn't have done that. Sorry."

Johnson was apologizing as if he had made some trivial social error while Jason was having his reality rearranged.

"So...let's talk gardening." Apparently, Johnson wasn't going to pursue the matter of disappearing.

Jason stared at Johnson a few silent seconds. He knew he was going to have to talk gardening or nothing so Jason produced the branch, still glowing, from his shirt pocket.

"Why...how did this start glowing?"

"That happens with care. It's mostly a matter of perception."

Jason, a rage rising in him, looked at the branch and then at Johnson. He shook his head, trying to control himself.

"Johnson, you must know that I don't know what you're talking about. This glows because what?...*I* care...*you* care?...who, what cares? This has no meaning to me.You don't want to talk about disappearing, dancing lights, vanishing doors...OK. You want to talk gardening...and gardening is about plants and soil and seeds and digging around and making flowers...and...and...since, out of the long list of things I have seen today that I have never seen before, the twig looks to be the only thing you'll talk about...I just want to know, you know...what does the...how does the little twig here change color, glow, whatever? How? A simple question?"

Jason glared at Johnson. Johnson smiled ever so slightly, benevolently.

"OK," said Johnson, "let's go to the City."

Johnson stood up, reached down, grabbed Jason by the arm and heaved him gently to his feet.

From the time Jason left his sitting position until the time he stood up could not have been more than a second but in that instant everything changed. They were both standing on the side of a street in a giant city, stretching beyond them as far as Jason could see, lights and buildings to the horizon in every direction, people bustling along narrow streets, air clear and cool, smells fragrant and fresh and the noise of the City, musical.

"I think you'll enjoy it here," Johnson said walking away down the street, waving for Jason to follow. It was early morning.

Chapter Three

The light poured in and rested upon Salizar. Muriel, his daughter, came into the room.

"Is he here?" she asked.

Salizar nodded, got up from the sofa he had been lying on, crossed to the window, and looked out. The scene outside the window changed from a sandy and rocky desert with far mesas into one of a busy street where people were moving about, beginning the day. Jason and Johnson came into view, walking along one of the streets. Salizar pointed to Johnson and spoke.

"Johnson is with him. He's earlier than I had thought he would be."

Muriel was glad she would see Johnson again, her favorite of all the Gardeners.

"How long until they get to Treva's?" she asked.

"Perhaps one level, maybe two. Not long." As he walked away from the window the view changed again to a deep green forest with towering trees dappled by early morning sunlight. "Would you like to go meet them?"

Muriel smiled and ran to hug her father.

"Do you feel prepared?" he asked, looking down at her and stroking her hair.

She nodded. Muriel appeared to be a young woman. Today she had chosen to express beauty with long honey-colored hair and gray eyes. While this was not her favorite appearance, she too had felt Jason's presence and knew the time was at hand for her to meet him. So she had chosen Beauty because it would be easy for Jason to discern and appreciate, and Johnson had seen it previously so it would be easy for him to recognize her. She squeezed her father one more time and left the room.

Muriel went to her Garden. There, from a bush like the one in Jason's back yard, she broke off a small branch, releasing its aroma. This would be a perfect perfume today. She put it in a pocket and zippered up the jacket she was wearing. It looked like a leather jacket with a brass zipper up the front, but it was not leather and it was not brass. Then she disappeared.

Johnson was walking too fast for Jason.

"Johnson, slow down!" Jason called after him.

Johnson turned and stopped.

"I don't usually spend much time in this part. I forgot you never saw it. What do you think of it."

"I'm still...how did we get here?" Jason was out of breath.

"I'll show you but we have to get to the Center first and it's quite a way. We can go slower if you like...I mean, that's if you want to sightsee."

The first thing that came into Jason's mind was 'Why didn't we pop into the Center instead of here?' but he said nothing. He had gone from being bored to being amazed so fast he was feeling totally disoriented. All the questions he thought to ask raised more questions, so instead of saying anything he kept walking and looked around.

Johnson was ambling now.

"This is Stillport. It's the first place you come into when you travel to the City. The City has no end...I mean, it has boundaries, like the River, and so on, but it goes in all directions as far as you want to go. Each section has its own purpose but there is no marketplace. All the houses and buildings are linked in a way that makes trade immediate on the one hand and unnecessary on the other. There aren't any zones or restrictions. Anyone can live anywhere. Stillport is for arrivals."

Jason was looking at the shop fronts as Johnson was talking. Each seemed to be some type of business but Jason couldn't make out what they were.

"Are these shops or businesses of some kind?" he asked.

"Not like you think. These are activity windows. They change all the time. They look like shops because they open to the street. Sometimes you get a traveler who comes in and doesn't know what to do or where to go so these stores are here for that. Get somethin' t' eat, maybe a room for the night, ask directions. Whatever a first-time traveler needs. Want to go in one?"

Jason shook his head no.

"No, but I'd like to stop and think. Rest or...I'm just...I dunno..."

"I know. Look, let's go in here."

The light from the window of the small store front glowed in the early morning. The small cafe was just opening, the waitresses straightening its five tables and twenty chairs, serving the seven people in the place, none of whom looked up as Jason and Johnson sat down. One waitress came to their table. Jason knew she was the owner.

"Hungry?" she asked both of them. She was a big woman with a ruddy complexion, a pleasant smile, wearing a white waitress uniform with a green apron from which she pulled a pad and pencil, ready to write.

"Not really," said Jason, "I ..."

"Something to drink?" She seemed impatient.

"Something hot," said Johnson.

The waitress stuffed the pad and paper back in her apron and walked away.

"You have to tell me how we got here." Jason looked squarely at Johnson.

"OK, I'll tell you but you won't understand it....I mean...OK. First of all we didn't come here, it came to us. And you get `here' by using the `out' of the place you're `in.'" Johnson used his fingers for quotes.

Jason stared blankly. Johnson shrugged.

"I told you. Do me a favor. Loosen up and watch. You gotta lotta stuff to do an' all before you start this. You still got the twig?"

Jason pulled the twig out of his pocket. It no longer glowed. It was brittle, bits of it breaking off.

The waitress walked up to the table with two steaming mugs of liquid. She saw the twig Jason was holding up. She seemed startled. She looked at Jason then to Johnson. As she set the mugs down she said to Johnson, "Are you a Gardener?"

Johnson nodded as she held out a hand to Jason. "Can I see that?"

Jason handed her the twig. She took it and twirled it in her fingers.

"*Ficus Carica*?" she asked Johnson.

Johnson nodded his head and motioned to Jason. "His Garden."

This startled the waitress even more. She looked at Jason a moment then broke into a slight smile.

"So you're..."she smiled broadly. "I want to give you something." She hurried back to the kitchen, returned quickly with a small box that she handed to Jason, motioning for him to open it. "I'm Treva. This will help you remember me. Take it with you to the Spring."

Jason looked in the box. There were dried flowers, still aromatic but apparently dead a long time. Johnson looked across the table into the box.

"Well, I don't..." Jason started, but before he could finish Johnson interrupted.

"These are *Rivina Vernalis,*" he said, obviously impressed.

Treva nodded and smiled.

"They belonged to my sister. I've been waiting to give them to the right Gardener."

Jason stammered, "Well, I'm not..."

But again Johnson interrupted.

"Thank you. Thank you, very much."

"The drinks are on me," Treva said. She reached out and grabbed Jason's hand. "It's a real pleasure. A real honor. Remember. Treva." She was beginning to get excited and finally blushed as she backed away from the table and, it seemed to Jason, gave a slight bow when she went again into the kitchen.

"I'm not a Gardener, Johnson. What was she talking about?"

"Sure you are. Come on, drink up and let's go." Johnson's eyes twinkled as he grabbed his mug and drank half the drink down in one gulp.

"*Rivina Vernalis*. Salizar, you are a wonder," Johnson said to himself standing up and finishing the rest.

Jason gulped the hot liquid. It was sweet and mild and easy to drink. Jason hurried. He was getting used to Johnson's sudden moves and knew another one was coming.

Johnson walked outside and looked up and down the street. Jason sat for a moment then picked up the tiny box and shook it, making the dried flowers' fragrance rise. At the same time he noticed that the branch he was carrying had regained its subtle glow. Jason pushed the box and twig in his pocket, looked out at Johnson and then glanced around the restaurant. Everyone was looking at him. He tried to smile but was too uncomfortable. He gave a weak nod to the patrons as he got up and headed out the door. Johnson was down the street ahead of him by several meters, humming to himself as he walked along. The street was busier now, all the passersby walking with a mixture of purpose and pleasure. Everyone looked busy and appeared to have a destination, but none were in a hurry. Jason got his first good look at some of the houses and buildings on the street.

They were contiguous along the side of the street, none more than four stories tall, stretching as far as Jason could see. At the end of each street was a cross street with more of the same houses and buildings.

Jason saw that many of the buildings were similar to Johnson's house in the country. They were made of the same material as his, appearing to be wood or stone or brick but not organic, with windows and doors but no apparent seams of construction.

One small house, a brick house with two windows, a center door and planter boxes full of tulips beneath each of the windows, caught Jason's attention. The tulips were in full bloom, showing the most brilliant orange. The house was perfectly symmetrical as if a child had drawn it. Jason stopped to look. While he was looking the house changed completely. It became a frame house with tongue and groove horizontal paneling, the planter boxes beneath the windows replaced by tall conical evergreens growing from a bed of earth beneath each window. Jason jumped back.

Jason disliked these sudden shifts in reality. They were, at least, annoying and were causing him to feel anger as well as trepidation.

He looked down the street for Johnson but could not see him. The crowd was dense. Jason hurried in the direction he had last seen Johnson.

He could see the houses and buildings changing in appearance every few minutes, each at different times, giving the City a slow, shimmering quality, like thousands of slowly and randomly flashing lights.

He remembered a play he had seen inside the Prison. He had been watching a scene when lights were projected on an almost transparent curtain, making the curtain appear to be a solid wall. Then the lights had changed, transforming the "wall" into something different. These houses changed much like that except in the play the curtain had always been slightly noticeable. Here these houses appeared substantial and changeless. Until, of course, they did.

Jason pressed through the crowd but could not see Johnson although he was certain he must be close. He came to the end of the street. There was another street perpendicular to the one he was on that extended in both directions until it, too, ended in another intersection. Jason stopped, looking both ways. No sign of Johnson. He looked back the way he came. He could not recognize where he had been. The houses had all changed. There was nothing to distinguish one street from the other. Jason had no idea where he was and he had no idea where Johnson had gone. He felt trapped. He had the horrible feeling the City was a maze.

He decided to walk back down the street he was on. Perhaps he could get back to Stillport. He didn't remember any of the buildings there changing. Perhaps, he thought, that's why it's called Stillport.

As he walked, the feeling of being lost continued to build. He knew no one, had no idea how he got where he was and had no idea if he was going in the right direction to return to the Cafe. As each person passed by him there was no contact other than the occasional brush of clothing. No one looked at him and he was much too afraid to speak to them. He thought he should be getting to Stillport, but the street dead-ended into another and Stillport was nowhere in sight. He stopped and looked up and down each street, lost and confused. He had no idea what to do so he did nothing. Finally, he looked up.

He saw the sky, familiar blue with white clouds, sunny and clear and warm. Somewhere in the heavens above the City was the same sky he had at his cabin in the country. He thought about his cabin. He would never leave again if he got back.

He shoved both hands into his pockets and leaned against one of the ever-changing buildings. He felt the branch and pulled it out of his pocket. It was shining and wonderfully, sweetly fragrant. He found comfort in gazing at the branch. He closed his eyes and drank in the perfume. He put the small branch back in his pocket. Why, he wondered, did it shine? He was aware of the perfume lingering in the air even though the twig was put away.

"It shines the way it does because you see it that way."

He opened his eyes. It was a young girl.

"I'm Muriel," she said. "Where's Johnson?"

"I don't know. I stopped to look at one of the buildings and when I looked up he was gone."

"I suppose he went on to the Center," she continued. "It's OK. I can take you." She waved for Jason to walk along with her. "We can walk. It's a nice day and you can see more of the City."

"I'm not sure I want to," said Jason. "It's frightening. When it all changes it starts to look like a maze."

"That must be why Johnson left you alone. The City does look like that when you don't...I mean when you...let's see...You needed to stop running around."

"I wasn't running around. I stopped to look at a house." Jason wasn't sure what she meant.

"No...I didn't say that right. I know you weren't running around. Johnson is trying to teach you to garden...well, not teach you, but...anyway...and you had to get lost so you wouldn't ask so many questions. I mean actually lost, like you were."

"I ask too many questions?"

"Hey...there's one now," she laughed. "No...Well, the questions aren't the problem. It's more the 'demanding-to-know-the-answer' that is the problem. It's like if you were..." she sighed. She stopped walking and turned and looked at Jason.

"I can't explain it. I'm supposed to get you to the Spring. That's my job. I'm terrible at explaining things." She began walking again.

Jason was intrigued by her beauty, innocence, and casual air. He found it almost impossible to take his eyes from her. He had never seen such exquisite, simple loveliness. They rounded a corner.

What Jason saw came in grim, sharp contrast to Muriel. The streets of the once gleaming City now were dingy, lined with squalid ugly houses. There were pathetic people here, shuffling along, glaring out from terrible faces, watching Jason and Muriel with a mixture of predatory hate and envy. Jason felt real danger. Muriel seemed oblivious.

"I should have prepared better...for the questions, I mean...but the trip is difficult enough on its own and I didn't think I would need to provide any detailed explanations."

Muriel's beauty and innocence conspired to make both of them fragile and obvious targets. As they continued to walk and the City became dreary, dark, and ominous, Jason became aware that they were being followed.

"Do we have to go this way?" he asked.

"It's the only way to the Center from where we were," she said.

There was trouble here. Jason knew it. He felt as if they were the target of some fierce vengeance or jealousy, some formless thing rising from an unseen depth and drawing them both to its deadly menace.

"Can't we pop over there...like Johnson brought me here...to the City?"

"No," she said flatly.

Jason knew he must act. Something was dreadfully, hideously wrong. They were being followed and Jason knew for certain they were about to be attacked. He grabbed Muriel's arm and pulled her into a doorway after him. The entranceway was dark, surrounded by a brick portico. He pressed hard against the passage, holding his finger to his lips for silence. Muriel was still, unalarmed. As the evil presence approached, Jason wanted to look to see the face of his adversary, to know its intent, but he knew intuitively that to look out of the doorway was death, real and terrifying. He pressed harder against the portal until it snapped opened and he and Muriel slipped inside.

They were in an old house that appeared abandoned. Inside it was immense and, like Johnson's, had no apparent connection in size to its exterior dimensions, with many doors lining each wall of a huge hall. The front door slowly swung shut behind them.

It was dark here. Jason saw Muriel's form only in silhouette. He pulled her to him, protecting her as he studied the doors surrounding the great room. They all looked the same. He wanted to go through one, wanted more distance between him and whatever horror was outside. Clutching Muriel around the waist he made his way to the nearest doorway. He would guard her at all cost. Muriel was unperturbed. She went with Jason but without urgency.

Jason held Muriel close. Her hair glistened from an unseen light. It was lovely. Jason could smell the scent of the branch she was carrying, its wonderful fragrance gathering him in. They reached the door and Jason tried to push them through, but the door held fast. He thought of trying another but froze in terror when he heard footsteps on the outer porch. Whatever it was had stopped outside the main door. He pulled Muriel tight to him and tried to squeeze them into the tiny door jamb off the great chamber. Then, something swept over him. His breath came short. His hands trembled. Jason, so close to Muriel, folded both his arms around her. He felt an impulse, a passion stronger than any he had known. Everything faded into this feeling. The danger vanished. The evil presence outside was of no concern. All he could see or think about was Muriel. He took her face in his hands. She looked at him, innocent, perfect, beautiful, captivating. He moved towards her.

"It's not possible," she said without speaking.

She looked at him with a look of pure compassion.

"It is a belief that lingers from the Prison," she said again, without words.

Jason backed away, ashamed.

"No shame," she said. "No blame."

The main door rattled loudly from outside. Whatever was out there was coming in. The door was opening slowly.

"Who's there?" he yelled. The door stopped moving. "Who are you? What do you want?"

Muriel pulled away from Jason and, pushing lightly on the door they were standing against, opened it, revealing brilliant light, the sound of rushing water, and a City street busy with people, leading to a plaza with a fountain at its center. Jason saw Johnson standing next to Salizar beside the fountain. Muriel stepped through the door and onto the street, motioning for Jason to follow. There was another loud creak and shake from the outside door as it continued to open. A long, dark, sinister shadow snaked across the floor of the great hall and filled the room with a sickening gloom.

Chapter Four

Jason stared, frozen from fright but wild with wonder. There was something beyond evil on the other side of the front door and Jason knew it was coming after him. He saw Muriel beckon to him again from outside. The door to Muriel was closing as fast as the other door was opening. Another second perhaps and he would see his predator, yet in the same second the door to Muriel would be closed. In an instant he knew it would not open again. He turned and dove toward the closing door, tumbled out, and fell on the street at Muriel's feet.

Johnson and Salizar rushed to him. Muriel helped him to his feet.

"I wanted to see what was after us," Jason said.

Salizar brushed Jason's clothing.

"You're OK," he said as a fact.

"It was nothing," said Muriel.

A feeling of miserable guilt caught Jason unaware. Jason wasn't shy and had never felt embarrassed about any of his feelings, but at this moment he felt mortified. He felt as if his conduct with Muriel had been unspeakably wrong.

Muriel knew what Jason was thinking. She glanced at him with great affection. Jason noticed her eyes. They were deeper, more radiant, with something coming through them he hadn't seen. He knew more about her. It was an awful, perplexing moment. Had he done anything wrong? Or not?

Salizar saw Jason's thoughts beginning to wander along this line.

"Jason," he said. "Stop. Don't worry. Nothing's wrong."

The comment from this stranger startled him. Did his anxiety show that much? Should he hide it?

"I feel terrible," said Jason.

"Because you are trying to use your thinking to distinguish right from wrong. That's not what your thinking is for. It's to distinguish the real from the unreal," said Salizar.

"I don't..." said Jason, confused.

"He'd better go," Johnson interrupted. "Or he won't make it before night."

"That's right," said Salizar. "You'd better go."

"Where?" asked Jason.

"I'll show you the way," Muriel said, walking away and motioning for Jason to follow. Johnson, Jason and Salizar followed Muriel across the town square passing the fountain with water bubbling up and around it.

"This is the only water left flowing through the town," said Johnson as they passed the fountain.

"The water in the river has stopped running," Muriel said. "You can get it turned back on."

"Me?" asked Jason

"Follow Muriel. She'll get you there," said Salizar

They had come to one side of the Square and looked out from the edge of a canyon across to the other side, where Jason saw mountains and forest. The canyon was deep with twisted half-stumps of trees rising from a swampy floor. It was the edge of the City.

"This used to be a river," said Muriel. "It flowed from a spring up in the mountains. If we cross over the riverbed, get to the other side and go on to the spring, you can get the river flowing again."

Muriel headed down into the swamp in the riverbed canyon. Salizar and Johnson stopped. Jason didn't know what was expected of him.

"You got the branch?" asked Johnson. Jason nodded yes.

"And the dried flowers?" asked Salizar. Jason felt in his pocket. The little box was still there. He nodded.

"Good. A Dios," said Salizar.

Salizar patted Jason on the back and gently pushed him after Muriel who was walking away fast into the muddy river bottom. Jason was left with no choice but to hurry after her. The mud was slippery, forcing Jason to grab the tree stumps for support. Muriel stopped, turned and waited until Jason caught up.

"This place is wretched," said Jason as they made their way together. Muriel was having no trouble but Jason was trudging, each step more toilsome as the mud began to cake around his shoes.

"Who is that man with Johnson?" asked Jason.

"He's who you would call my father," said Muriel.

"I would *call* your father? Is he your father or not?"

"In this world he is my father," she said.

"This world?"

"He's my father."

"What other worlds are there?" demanded Jason.

"Please, Jason. I can lead you to the other side of the river, but as I told you, I'm not good at explaining. Please don't ask me to explain things to you. He's my father."

They trudged a few more moments, mute.

"Can I ask another question?" said Jason.

Muriel sighed.

"You don't have to answer but I think you can tell me. What was outside the door when we were in the...that house?"

"It was nothing...nothing to be afraid of."

"I was very afraid...and I had...have...no idea what it was. That makes me more afraid."

She stopped, turned and looked into Jason's eyes, searching, silent, until at length, she spoke:

"OK, I'll try. It was nothing...literally. Nothing. Salizar said, 'Use your thinking to distinguish the real from the unreal, not right from wrong.' Well, trying to tell right from wrong...or, I mean...good from bad...which are opinions, makes you afraid because you can never come up with the correct answer. Maybe it's right one time but then the next...well...but if you can tell the true from the false you never get afraid. Because, if you know what's true...what's real...then, you see...there is nothing to be afraid of, really... see, it's...if you had known what was true you would have known nothing was outside that door and you wouldn't have been afraid...and there was no reason to be afraid...and there is never a reason to be afraid..."

The ramble broke and she looked again at Jason, this time reaching, her eyes emphasizing unspoken words, straining to communicate until, finally frustrated, she started walking again.

"You're right," Jason said after a moment. "You don't explain things very well. I also think you're wrong."

"Being afraid never gives you anything," she continued. "Fear is worthless. Nothing comes of it but more fear."

"Nonsense," said Jason. "Fear is the universal emotion. And it serves a very useful function. For one thing, it keeps us from doing stupid things."

"That's not fear...that's wisdom."

"How do you tell the difference between wisdom and fear?" he asked.

"One is real, the other isn't."

Jason thought Muriel was either crazy or extremely smart, for while there was a comforting ring to what she said, her logic evaded him, and was altogether absent or exalted beyond his reach. Without a sense of right and wrong he would be a moral wreck, ethically adrift, and he could think of many things that were both quite real and as awful as they were real, but he decided to keep quiet about them for now. Perhaps she was vague and inarticulate, even a little mad, but Muriel was, at very least, the most interesting person he had met.

They descended deeper into the riverbed canyon, the walls of each shore rising above them. It was muddy and dank and getting worse the farther they went. The contorted landscape, black from layers of silt and slime, showed no sign of life, only tree stumps rising from the ground, gnarled, covered with a shiny ooze. The more they walked the deeper the mud got. After they descended the sloping side of the riverbank and began to cross the river bottom, the mud was up to their ankles. Progress was laborious and slow. Jason was working hard to keep up with Muriel, who moved easily although just as slowly as Jason. The sun, directly overhead, was hot but the dampness created a chill when the low wind hit his face.

Jason looked back for the first time. He could see the City high above them on the riverbank, shimmering from the constantly changing buildings. They had come a great distance and Jason realized how vast the riverbed was. In front of him the opposite bank of the river rose into the sky like a faraway mountain.

Even though Jason was trudging through mud up to his ankles, crossing an enormous and desolate river-bottom plain, he was calm and unafraid. Muriel's self-assurance pervaded his thinking. He was traveling by her light, and he felt good. Circular logic or not, she was a strong and noble spirit. As long as she was around he would be fine.

"I'm not going all the way to the spring with you," said Muriel.

A knot appeared in Jason's stomach.

"Don't be afraid," she said.

'Don't be afraid'? Jason thought. 'How can you say that so...', but as he was about to say it, Jason heard a distant voice. It was not out loud. It was inside his thinking but it was a voice, like someone else talking to him. The voice was faint and very, very calm.

"Don't argue with the Angels," it said. "Angels say what they mean and only that. No more, no less. If they say 'Don't be afraid' then that's what they mean and that's all there is to say. So listen. You can either do what they say or not. But don't argue. Not with Angels."

The more the voice spoke the clearer it sounded but Jason wasn't certain whether it was his own thinking or someone speaking to him. The message, though, was explicit. Still, he *was* afraid. He didn't believe in Angels, or more precisely, he didn't know what an Angel was or if there was such a thing, so he couldn't think Muriel was an Angel. He said nothing, plodding on in silence.

Although gently, they had been walking progressively downhill and, as they came to the far side, Jason could see the opposite bank was a cliff, a steep almost vertical ascent, slippery with algae, rock-lined all the way to the top, and apparently unscalable. Jason and Muriel stood side by side looking up the rocky face. It was impossible to climb.

Muriel took Jason's hand, held it tightly and stepped close to him. She shut her eyes for a second, was perfectly still, and then gradually, side by side...they began to rise.

It was as if everything holding them down had let go. Muriel gave a slight push on his hand as he rose with her, weightless. Jason was euphoric. He had never flown except in his dreams. This was the best experience he had ever had.

"Maybe she is an Angel," Jason thought. He was enthralled by the feeling of weightlessness and flying. They were rising at about the same rate they had been walking and as they rose higher and higher along the river bank the rocks that lined it became drier and drier, the air clearer and sweeter, the view farther and better until they were at the top. They hovered there for a few seconds and then Muriel guided them to the bank. Jason had no idea how she was maneuvering but she had a great deal of control. When they were above the dry, grassy shore, they touched down lightly.

"That was magnificent," said Jason.

"It's fun, isn't it? Some day you'll learn. Salizar taught me. That's why I came. To get you up this far shore. We all knew you couldn't climb it."

"Can you teach me to fly like that?" Jason asked.

"Sure," said Muriel. "When you get back."

Jason knew this was where Muriel would leave, but the thrill of the flight was still with him and he had no sadness or fear.

Jason had a slight sensation Muriel was about to disappear. He realized he had felt it before, when Johnson had disappeared, but hadn't known what it was.

"Wait!" he said. "I will see you...I mean...Will I see you again?"

She nodded, "Once the river is flowing."

She lifted easily off the ground. Jason wanted to hold on but he didn't. She moved up and away from Jason gently.

"I'll be in the City. You can always find me there. And I'll be sure to come see you."

She was drifting out above the river bed.

"Are you an Angel?" Jason shouted after her.

"No," she smiled. The thought amused her. "You'll do fine from here. Remember, don't be afraid...ever...of anything."

Then she vanished.

Chapter Five

Jason could see the City on the far bank of the river through the clear sky where Muriel had been a second earlier. Jason looked down at himself, covered with mud.

"Why didn't we fly all the way here?" he yelled at the vacant space.

The grassy area he was standing on was at the edge of a palm grove. Beyond a forest and in the distance, mountains were drawn against the sky, their alluvial fans enfolding the cool, green wood below them. A waterfall, cradled at the top of one of these great alluvial fans, landed in a high mountain pool. Edging the woods was a grove of mature Alexandria palms with sprays of cream-colored flowers and feather-shaped arching fronds casting interwoven shadows on the forest floor. The aroma of night-blooming jasmine enveloped Jason and this magnificent scene of a palm-ringed forest with the mountains and waterfall behind it. Jason assumed the Spring must be in the direction of the waterfall so he headed into the woods, towards it.

It was going to be a long walk; the trees lay before him for many kilometers. He knew that inside the forest he could not dead reckon to the waterfall because of the great height of the trees and the canopy their branches would make, and he wasn't sure how he would find his way after nightfall.

The forest beyond the palm grove consisted of large conifers, Macedonian pine and other large, broadly conical trees, silvery blue-green in color, creating a lovely contrast to the emerald green of the palms and adding to the aromatic wonder of the jasmine. There were several trees of exceptional beauty. One type, a cashmere pine had pendant flat blue sprays that gave it the appearance of a weeping willow. Another, an intertexta, had the same pendulous sprays, but arrayed in lax, splayed branches seemingly braided from tall columnar trunks. Growing lower to the ground were ferns and climbers of many varieties: crispum, royal fern, soft shield fern, and then every several meters a tree fern. The floor of the forest was covered with many grasses, the most prevalent being maiden grass with narrow leaves untypically quite low to the ground.

Jason thought it unusual that such varied plants as conifers and palms could grow side by side, but more surprising was that he knew this, since he had never paid any attention to plants and had always hated gardening. But he instinctively knew these plants as well as their growing patterns.

There were even more remarkable elements becoming visible to his thinking, the most salutary being the existence of a well-worn path leading through the middle of all this growth and in the general direction of the waterfall. He started following the path with a sure sense it would lead him, if not to the Spring, then to the next stage of his journey.

As he walked along it occurred to him the sun had been in the same place in the sky as long as he had been traveling. When he came to the City, it was at mid-sky and it was still there, clear and bright.

The path ran out, dead-ending into a small clearing surrounded by the forest.

Ordinarily, this would have sent Jason into a panic but this time there was a resolute calm that was with him since he crossed the river with Muriel, a patience, a trust, a willingness to wait. He examined the plant life surrounding him. The ground was covered with small, smooth pebbles which had growing among them hundreds of small and exquisite succulents, cacti, and pearly moonstones or sugared almonds. These plants, growing in clumps, had opalescent rosettes of oval pinkish-blue leaves and looked as if they were covered with velvet, each rosette mingling with other plants to form a carpet rich in soft iridescence.

A rustling from the trees told him someone was coming. Jason felt apprehension but replaced this with quiet expectation. A man walked out of the Forest and towards Jason. He looked familiar.

"Remember me?"

Jason squinted and looked long and hard.

"Pick? Are you Pick from the Prison?" Jason asked after a moment.

"That's right. I live here. Jack told me you were coming through and so I thought I'd meet you here. You got here fast."

"I followed the path," said Jason.

"Good, you found it. I didn't know whether you could see it or not. There are plenty of paths into here but not everyone sees them." Pick motioned all around him. "This is my garden. I've been working on it since I got here. Learned it from a Gardener named Tom. Of course, Jack too. You want to get to the Spring, no doubt, so we better get going. It'll be night soon." Pick motioned for Jason to follow.

Jason looked high at the sun. It hadn't moved. Jason said nothing and followed.

As they walked along, the branches from the trees rubbed against Jason and with each touch removed a bit more of the river-bottom mud that had dried completely.

"I thought I'd go by way of the

flower garden. It's not out of the way and you might like it," Pick said after they had walked in silence for a while.

Jason had to continually suppress the notion to ask Pick questions. He felt foolish walking along in silence with a stranger. He wanted to make small talk or be convivial but nothing came to mind except questions, so he focused on the journey. Frankly, he didn't have the slightest desire to go to the Spring and do whatever he was supposed to do, had no idea how to get the river flowing and didn't care if the river flowed or not, and he wasn't interested in gardening or flowers, but out here, well, who could tell? If Pick's Flower Garden was anything like the size, the spectacle, and the grandeur of the fabulous beauty surrounding him, then it would be an amazing sight.

As they came to the top of a small rise at the end of a meadow the Flower Garden appeared ahead of them.

There were three flowers.

"Here it is." Pick pointed with pride to the less than one meter square flower garden. He bent down, looking at one of the plants, and gestured with his eyes for Jason to examine the flowers more closely.

Jason bent down next to one, and the closer he came the more he saw the gentle light coming from the plant, like the light coming from the branch he had in his pocket. The branch and flower even had the same aroma. He stared, transfixed.

The flowers were cup-shaped with tiny trumpet-shaped petals intermingling, forming small rows in a range of pink, purple, and white, so fine and so intricately and precisely arrayed as to appear as down feathers or a fine fur. The most unusual feature, though, was not the way the petals looked; it was the fact that they were moving.

It was not movement from the wind or any external force. The flowers were moving internally as if completely rearranging all their molecules and atoms all the time. Jason realized he had seen this glimmering, constant movement before, in the City.

He drew closer. Unlike the branch from his own bush, the flower seemed to be radiating light. No, on closer look, it was made of light. It appeared solid, appeared to have mass and appeared opaque but it was made entirely of light. This light was its primary element, continuous in renewal, with the overall form quite stable and identifiable.

Jason moved even closer. He thought he could see an interplay of light producing the flower, the light creating an opposite dark and continuously shifting back and forth from light to dark to light.

Closer still. He was so close now there was nothing but the flower in his field of view. Now, he could see the relationship of light to dark was illusory. There was no absence of light. It was all light patterns, regenerating and shifting.

Of course, thought Jason. How could light create dark?

Then all the movement stopped and Jason saw only the flower. Then, saturated with the spirit of this flower, Jason glimpsed the rules of Johnson's disappearing and Muriel's flying although he still didn't have the slightest idea how to do either one. He could see that the underlying nature of the flower was not a successively regenerating pattern of some type of light, whose opacity or transparency was discerned by his eyes. The flower, seeming to re-form continuously and instantly through each microscopic segment of time, in fact had a permanent, perpetual existence in the stillness of the present; a present that Jason understood; an omni-present, by which Jason could navigate, at will, all the regions of infinite Mind.

Pick tapped Jason on the shoulder.

Jason stood up slowly.

"Why, they're beautiful. Just... Just...beautiful," he said.

"Yeah. Well, you know...they're flowers." Pick touched one of them. "It's what they do."

The flower released more of the same heavenly scent Jason was becoming accustomed to.

"We better go. Right now. The waterfall is just ahead."

Jason heard the rush of the water in the distance as he and Pick headed toward it, a low thunderous roar of great power with bell-like overtones mixing among the deep tones, creating a sonic shimmer, similar to the visual shimmer of the Flowers and City. In addition there was an implied sound, unheard but felt, resonating precisely with the tone that implied it.

A few more steps and they came to the pool. The waterfall cascaded down over a hundred meters into it.

They were high now and Jason could see the view back across the forest and riverbed and into the City. He was unaware of any fatigue even though they had been climbing for some time.

Jason walked to the edge of the pool and dipped his hand into the water. The power of the waterfall was awesome and inspiring. The pool was deep, giving the water a dark bluish and purple color, and even with the tremendous amounts of water crashing down, the pool was calm, the cascading water disappearing into the center of the pool and down into its great stillness, continuing down and through, perhaps into some underground lake or stream.

"This is as far as I can take you," Pick said.

Jason stood up.

"Thanks. Thanks for showing me the Flower Garden."

"I'd take you farther if I knew how." Pick looked up at the huge cliff rising behind the waterfall. It was a shear, vertical face well over a hundred meters high. The waterfall was rolling off the top of it. "You have to get to the top plain somehow but I don't know the way."

"Are you sure I have to get to the top?" asked Jason.

"Oh, yes, absolutely. If you're going to get the River flowing again. You've got to get up and talk to Jack. He can start it up again."

"And Jack is...?"

"He's the keeper of the Spring."

"You know him?" Jason asked.

"Sure, he turned on the water for this Garden" said Pick.

"How did you get up there?"

"Tom flew me up. Like I say, this is as far as I can take you."

"OK. I'm very grateful for everything you've done. I'll wait here and see what happens next."

Jason shook Pick's hand. In that instant he realized why Pick had run from him outside the Prison. Pick was to be Jason's guide. Not the other way around.

"Yeah. That's the best thing to do." Pick turned and walked away into the forest, pausing at the edge to wave one last good-bye.

Jason looked up at the sky. The sun, still bright as noonday, made the talk about getting the journey underway by nightfall seem silly. Jason walked to the edge of the pool, lay down on the grass, and looked all the way up the great waterfall, watching the beautiful falling water. As Jason's thoughts started to run back over his journey, he stopped. He could control this. As he had traveled, with many opportunities to direct his thoughts along different paths, he was amazed to learn his thinking was one thing he could control easily and naturally. He had had enough contemplation, now he wanted to rest. Not sleep, but deeply relax. The roar of the waterfall was soothing. He closed his eyes and settled in.

Chapter Six

When Jason opened his eyes it was dark, the reflected light of the stars giving the forest a soft and shadowy look, the lights of the City in the distance twinkling amber, the waterfall a luminescent silver. He sat up. There was a quiet, restful and regenerating stillness here. Even the tumult of the waterfall did not disturb the tranquility but instead was an important part of it. The first light of dawn started over the horizon.

Jason moved to the edge of the pool and dipped his hand into the water. He took all his clothes off, laid them in a pile on the bank and dove in. The water was reflecting the rising sun, and as Jason held up his cupped hands, letting the water run down his arms and back into the pool, the water appeared gold and pink and purple and blue. Jason swam back and forth in the pond and then under the waterfall itself. The water fell hard, stinging his skin where the droplets hit, and the foment, caused by the water hitting the pool, pulled and pushed him like a cork bobbing on the sea. He looked directly up into the waterfall, singled out a droplet and followed its wandering, wind-driven path until it hit the pool, noticing how the path of each drop was different from the next. He peered close into the water trying to see the same effect he had seen with the flowers but saw nothing except the bubbling waters. The water was not emanating light but reflecting it.

The sun was up and morning was full. In the bright, glancing sunlight, he saw a small rainbow, created by the fine mist of the waterfall. The visible spectrum of light in its familiar rainbow pattern hovered above him as he swam around, almost able to see a complete circle of color except where the circle disappeared into the pool. The remarkable show of light and water was captivating. Each drop of water, each element of the rainbow had a precise and determined action. In the chaos and crashing of this huge waterfall he saw order appear like a game, with a precise set of rules, whose outcome is unknown until the game is finished, every particle of every thing acting in perfect accord with the law that governed it.

Without warning, the waterfall stopped, as if someone high up on the plains above had shut off a valve. The silence jarred. There was no movement except Jason splashing around in the pool. He swam to the bank, got out, and got dressed.

He saw now why the waterfall had stopped. Hollowed out from the rock behind the falling water was a stairwell. It was his way to the top and someone was beckoning him.

Jason edged his way along a narrow shelf between the cliff and the pool, and swung around onto a landing. He walked only a few feet when he heard the water begin to fall from the top plain. As he walked further into the passage and turned a corner that led him to the foot of the stairs, he heard the water hit the pool again with full force.

The stairs zig-zagged all the way to the top with small windows on each landing that allowed him to look out. From inside Jason could tell why the windows had been invisible to him. The cliff had an intermittent covering of Chinese wisteria that obscured the little windows, the plant's lilac and pale violet-covered branches acting as perfect camouflage, making the windows appear as part of the vine. Jason paused at each window to enjoy the ever-widening view.

The stairwell, unused for some time, was dusty and many of the wisteria leaves had blown in the windows, creating small piles of petals in the corner of each landing.

After a steady climb of a hundred steps, Jason could see he was nearing the top. He also felt the first rustling sense of uneasiness. He felt the presence of something destructive, similar to the presence he felt in the City with Muriel. Muriel said it was nothing. Maybe it was, but the fear was real and he was feeling it again.

He could see light reflecting from the top of the stairwell. He stopped. A terror was crawling in, invading his precious serenity, destroying it by the second. He sat down on the steps, now able to see the light from the top of the stairs streaming in from the outside. He wanted to go on but he couldn't make himself. He was more and more certain something awful was there.

Could he calm himself? He wondered. He had more control over his thinking now but could he simply stop being afraid? What was he afraid of? He didn't know. It was an instinctive feeling something was dreadfully wrong. It wasn't based on anything he could identify.

Slowly a shadow crept over the stairs and, with it, the sound of a low and ominous growl. Muriel's "nothing" was a "something" and it was at the top of these stairs. The shadow took on form but not like anything Jason recognized. Now, he was petrified.

"Don't be afraid! Ever! Of anything!" Muriel had said. Jason struggled. He tried thinking of other things. It was no use. He felt as if he had to do something. He couldn't sit here and let whatever it was come in after him.

Very quietly, this thought came:

"I haven't seen anything but a shadow. I have no reason to be afraid."

The shadow moved closer. He heard footsteps and saw something of a form. It appeared that he had reason to be very afraid and more than that...he needed to act.

Whatever this was would be in the stairwell in seconds and Jason knew he would have no chance in here. He had to get out. He must not let this monstrous thing corner him on the stair. Consumed by fear, at least he could be courageous. He drew himself up and took one halting step after another toward the top.

The shadow outlined on the wall appeared to be an enormous animal or beast. It snarled a menacing and final sound that was not a warning or threat but a resolve to destroy whatever it came upon.

None of the positive thinking he was practicing was helping in the least. All of Muriel's counsel to be unafraid was silly. Nothing he had learned on his journey had prepared him for this. He had to reach into an unknown part of himself to find the courage and strength to face this terror. He held a faint hope he would have the wisdom to do battle and win. He held an even fainter hope that nothing was really there. His overwhelming thought, though, was a cynical certainty he was going to his inevitable doom like everyone else in the Prison.

He took one final step around the corner of the landing and faced his adversary squarely.

There, towering above the doorway at the top of the stairs, was the embodiment of every terrible nightmare Jason had ever had. The thing was many times Jason's size, and seemed to be a reptile with four thick legs. Its giant leathery body absorbed light, making it appear covered with a black film. The head of the monster was enormous and close to its body, its thick neck ringed with a crusty horn-like surface. It was looking directly at Jason with yellow eyes, fixed as if painted on under small hooded slits, containing no life or recognition, only hideous intent. They did not move but were cold, blank and deadly. The creature seemed to predict Jason's movement. Jason moved slightly to his left and the monster's head tracked the movement to the centimeter, its eyes never moving. Jason took a step forward. The beast was perfectly still.

It was not standing directly in front of the doorway. There was a small space between the demon and the freedom of the open plain behind it. Jason no sooner had the thought of dashing through the opening, when the thing moved forward and blocked the path.

"Maybe I can back down slowly," he thought and moved backwards a centimeter. The creature moved forward a centimeter. Whatever motion Jason made was echoed precisely, except for movement toward the beast, which was met with a predatory patience. Jason was certain turning and running was useless. The monster, instant in its action, could catch and devour him in one sweep.

Jason thought of a weapon. He couldn't fight a monster with his bare hands. He put his hand in his pocket. He had nothing but the small branch and the little box with the dried flowers.

The creature took a step forward. Jason saw none of the signs of life in its eyes, only flat, horrible, non-focusing slits. It had no breath, gave off no heat. All it did was move to convey a deadly purpose.

Jason moved slightly to his right. The creature reacted and moved closer. Jason could see the intent was to get close enough to grab Jason in one of its huge claws.

The most horrifying of all feelings began to crawl over Jason. The monster had no signs of life because it wasn't alive. It was dead. It was Death itself.

All Jason's strength collapsed as he realized there was no way out. He couldn't fight this thing. It was linked to him as if it were his own body. The more he thought of escapes, the more they closed off. The more positive he tried to be, the more absurd the ideas became. All of his intellectual powers failed him. Here, faced with his final reality, was the truth about life. He was destined to die, to be annihilated.

Salizar and Muriel had said the only important distinction is between the true and the false. Jason stood facing the awful truth of certain death.

Well, thought Jason, so be it. It is only the truth I have wanted and so if this is reality, what use is it for me to fight?

Right behind that desperate, fatalistic, thought came another. This one had more light.

And if it isn't real, it can't hurt me.

Here was an idea worthy of notice. One to be trusted.

Wait. What was that? A voice? Inside his head? No. It was a real voice.

"Give her the flowers. She always likes the flowers."

The flowers? What flowers? Jason thought.

"What flowers?" he yelled.

The creature's eyes flashed and opened a bit wider. There was something there in the eyes, some life. It looked smaller, too.

"In your pocket."

Jason felt the small box in his pocket. He opened it with his thumb. The dried flowers fell out into his hand. The beast *was* smaller. Its leathery body took on a muted brownish color, the eyes appeared to focus, becoming rounder and brighter. Jason pulled the flowers out of his pocket and held them tight in his grip. The animal's ears stood up on its head. It was smaller still. Jason could see out the doorway and onto a trimmed lawn. A man in gardener's khakis was running up to him from far away.

"Betsy! Cut that out! Give her the flowers. She smells them."

The man ran up, panting. The creature was obviously some type of animal but Jason had never seen one like it. It was not a reptile but a mammal about the size of a large dog. The man grabbed its neck and gave it a friendly tug.

"Sorry. She's been excited since she knew you were coming. I told her someone was sending her flowers." A look of consternation. "You've got them, don't you?"

Jason nodded and opened his hand revealing the flowers. Betsy put a soft muzzle into Jason's palm and gently picked up the dried flowers with her tongue.

"There you go, Bets. Oh, look, Bets! *Rivina*. No wonder you were excited." The man stroked the animal's neck. "She loves this particular flower. Any other kind and she would have waited till you got up the stairs. Her name is Betsy...although you'll have to call her Elizabeth until you get to know her better."

The man extended his hand to Jason and smiled a crinkly friendly smile.

"I'm Jack. Welcome to the Spring."

Jason wiped the few remaining flower petals off his sweating palm and reached out and shook Jack's hand.

"I hope she didn't scare you," Jack said.

"Uh," said Jason, "she...well, there was a moment..."

"See, Bets? You've got to be more polite," Jack said to Betsy, giving her a loving pat. "Well, you're here now. Come on up."

Jack pulled Jason up the remaining stairs, into the light, and onto the lawn. Betsy nuzzled Jason's hand again.

"No more. See." Jason opened his hands and held them palms up. Betsy sniffed and ambled away.

"Uh, Betsy. What type of animal is she?" Jason asked.

"She's a honey bear. Some people call them sloth bears because of their funny nose and mouth."

A bear. Jason could see that now.

"She's real sweet," said Jack as they walked along.

They were on an expansive mesa atop the rock cliff. The manicured lawn was only a small part of an open area that went on for many kilometers into distant low hills. These were high plains with low vegetation. Some large boulders formed the only large mass rising from the plain. Jack's house sat alone near one of the large boulder hills. It did not seem to be the same type of house Johnson had or Jason had seen in the City, but it was quite familiar. They walked toward it.

"Not too many animals up here. Betsy came from the forest. She climbed up the stairs one day looking for food when she was a cub. On the way up she ate all of the wisteria blossoms. Now no one can even get up here unless they bring her flowers."

Jason hadn't seen any animals at all in the forest.

"Not too many people see the animals," said Jack.

"You read minds, too?" said Jason, assuming Jack was telepathic like all the rest.

"No, I don't," said Jack. "I simply enjoy the talk."

They had come to the house. It was remarkably similar to Jason's. It was made of logs. Real logs. And it had a weather-beaten quality Jason liked. It was homey. They went up the stairs and onto the porch where they stood as Jack pointed out the view. A near horizon of the high meadow was etched sharply against the sky by the cliff facing, and beyond that was the Forest and Pick's Garden, and farther still the City was visible as a small sliver of white against the far horizon.

"How did you know I was coming?" said Jason. "I mean if you can't read minds..."

"No, no, I said 'I don't' not 'I can't'. But that's not how I knew you were coming anyway. Lot of people come through. They told me. Although not too many come by the stairs." The remark was pointed but good natured. "Come in."

They went into the cabin and Jason was even more surprised at the familiarity. The kitchen, sleeping area and main room were arranged and built almost identically to his own. They sat in two small chairs with a table between them, looking out across the countryside.

"So what brings you here?" said

Jack after a pause for Jason to look around.

"Some people in the City, they...I think they wanted me to come up here and get the river flowing, but..."

"OK. What else?"

"Nothing really. I would be happy to get the river flowing for them but I don't know what to do."

"Nothing to do. Consider it done. I'll turn it on." Jack leaned back, licked his forefinger, and made an imaginary mark on the wall. "Anything else?"

Jason studied this last act. Was Jack being flip or was he making a point? Jason wasn't sure. "I'd like to go home. I was hoping you might be able to help me with that."

"Sure can. When do you want to go?" Jack smiled, confident, even cavalier, Jason thought.

Jason sensed a wisdom in Jack similar to that in Muriel, an odd mixture of lightheartedness and sober insight. Jack's flippancy offset the gravity of situations much the same way Muriel's wandering discourse offset bounding efforts at logic. These inappropriate responses to circumstance effected an out of balance dance of dialogue that was, nevertheless, in precise and perfect time to the song Jack and Muriel seemed to hear, a song that sang its way into all they said...so instead of putting him off, it drew Jason in.

"Jack? Could you explain some things to me?"

"What'ya want to know?"

"Well, start with Muriel flying. How does she do it?"

Jack leaned back. After a pause he said, "It's different with everyone. You're better off asking Muriel."

"What about Pick's flowers? What did I see there?"

Jack scratched his head. "Pick's flowers? Oh, Pick's Flowers. They're lovely...about four parts illusion, one part flower."

"But some of it was real?" asked Jason.

"Some of it." Jack nodded.

"How do I tell the difference?"

"Difference?"

"Salizar said I should try to determine the difference between the real and the unreal," Jason said.

"He did, huh? Well, you can't always tell, can you?"

"But," said Jason, "there must be some way to tell. Some laws or a principle, some basic...you know...theory?"

"You can garden. Only certain things grow. That's one way to tell." Jack smiled ever so faintly.

If he was making another point, Jason didn't get this one either. He was perplexed. All at once, the idea of tending his garden made him homesick.

"You want your water turned on?" asked Jack.

Jason didn't know what he was talking about.

"The arroyo between you and Johnson? You want the water on? It's up to you. I did it for you before but you can have it anyway you want."

Jason wasn't sure whether to turn it on or off. He knew nothing about this.

"I don't know, Jack. Yeah...I guess. Or...well...can I have it sort of on low. I mean I wouldn't know how..."

"I can turn it on but on is on. Can't have it on *and* off. But never mind. I'll run it for you for a while. You decide when you're ready to do it."

Jack stood up, walked to the front window and looked out. Betsy ambled up and lay down on the porch. Jason reached in his pocket and pulled out the branch he was carrying, glowing brightly as ever. He showed it to Jack. Jason was not getting what he thought he would from Jack but he decided to give one last try.

"Do you know why this glows like this?" Jason asked him

Jack studied it.

"Glow? I don't know. Might be a matter of perception." Jack turned the branch upside down and studied it more closely. He looked directly at Jason and his eyes twinkled mischievously. "You know who you should ask about this? You should ask Johnson. He's pretty good with ficus."

Jason laughed out loud and so did Jack.

"I guess I'm ready to go home."

"So long, Jase," said Jack.

With that, Jack vanished. Jason thought for a moment he was in the same spot but then he saw Johnson sitting in one of the chairs on the front porch.

Chapter Seven

Johnson jumped up and turned around, happy to see Jason as Jason surveyed the room. It was almost identical to Jack's except for the few simple furnishings.

"You made it!" said Johnson coming in the front door, "and the water is flowing through the river. You even got the water going in the arroyo." Johnson was smiling broadly and held out his hands to Jason in greeting.

Jason was very glad to see Johnson and even happier to be home.

"My house looks exactly like Jack's," said Jason.

"It should," said Johnson. "Jack built it. He was a Builder for a while, then a Guide for a long time, then a Gardener, and now he's the Keeper of the Spring."

As Johnson was talking Jason was looking out the back door of the cabin. Something remarkable was there. A glimpse of color drew him to the door.

"Most of the time the water runs fine," Johnson continued, "but every once in a while someone's gotta get it goin' or get it stopped as the case may be. The trick, as you know, is gettin to Jack. It can be quite a trip. Lotta stuff to go through...well, not...I mean..."

Jason was at the back door. He was staring, awestruck.

"This is amazing," he said.

Johnson walked behind Jason out the back door. The two of them stood there taking in the view.

"When did this...or how did this happen?" Jason asked

"Oh, I worked on it while you were gone. After the water came on in the arroyo it was easy," Johnson said.

Before them was Jason's garden, magically, inspiringly, transcendently beautiful.

A path, partially covered with orange nasturtiums spilling onto the walkway, obscuring the borders and creating a wandering effect, was overarched with great trellises of rambling rose. Three meters wide, it led from the back door down the center of two huge rectangular plots many meters square that rolled down a gentle grade to another path at right angles to the central aisle. The plots on each side of the main path were covered with flowers, rising from a low border of mauve tulips and deep burgundy velvet wallflowers, to the silver leaves of lamb's ears, to high swaying iris at the back. The edges were planted with lavender aubrieta, its low grayish foliage and rose, lilac, and purple flowers embracing and unifying the garden plots, all the colors intermingling to form an impression of flickering lights of blue, orange, gold, violet and red.

Beyond that was a pond, shaped like a figure eight, with one small end and one large end. At the waist of the figure eight was a humpbacked bridge arching across the pond and into a small meadow of low grass punctuated with large weeping willow trees. The pond was full of water lilies in bloom, the white, pink and red blossoms glistening against the deep green water that reflected patches of sky and gleaming white clouds, the whole scene undulating with the changing colors.

Jason was elated. This beauty was staggering, exquisite, intense.

"What did you do?" Jason asked slowly, emphatically.

"Like I said, Tom and Janey had this place growin' pretty good. It didn't take much."

Jason heard footsteps along the gravel path at the end of the garden. Rounding the corner onto the main path were Muriel and Salizar. They looked different.

Muriel was tall, coal-black straight hair fell about her shoulders, her brown eyes wonderfully set against light olive complexion, all framed by the flowers and rose-covered trellises as she and Salizar walked up the great path. Her presence in this Garden thrilled Jason.

Salizar was much larger than he remembered, with gray hair and a small very neatly trimmed mustache framing his pinkish, ageless face. They were both grinning with excitement as they walked up the path to Jason and Johnson.

"This looks spectacular," Salizar called out to Jason.

"*He* did it," Jason said pointing to Johnson.

"But he couldn't have if you hadn't started the water flowing," Salizar said approaching them. Salizar spontaneously and affectionately embraced first Jason then Johnson, patting each of them on the back, ecstatic.

"I didn't do anything," said Jason.

Muriel was standing before him, beaming, waiting for her turn to hug Jason, then, when she could, she threw her arms around Jason's neck and kissed him again and again on the cheeks.

"Wait," said Jason, "I didn't...I mean..." But Muriel held her finger to his lips.

"You did all you needed to," she said. She hugged him again tightly.

Jason was uncomfortable. To him, this celebration, misplaced or at least misdirected, reserved as it should have been for triumphant returns or weddings, was near shivaree.

"The River is flowing again. The City is shining," said Muriel.

"...and this Garden. Show us around," added Salizar.

Salizar walked back down the path examining the flowers. "These colors are combined to show such a wonderful balance. It's a work of art," he said as Jason started after him, with Muriel and Johnson a few steps behind.

Jason and Salizar walked, side by side now, down the main path through the center of the Garden, the flowers, in full bloom, rising in choir-like tiers on either side of them, engulfing them in floral array, so that seen from a distance only their heads appeared above the forest of blooms.

"The people in the City send their gratitude to you, Jason," said Salizar. He stopped walking and stooped to cup one of the delicate blossoms in his hand. "What is this?" he asked.

Surprising himself, Jason knew. "It's a bearded iris. The ones there," he pointed beside the iris, "are cranesbill, a perennial geranium."

The iris pierced through the smaller lilac flowers and geranium leaves, creating an undulating pattern of purple and gold. There was a profound sense of order here, of harmony, of rightness. The two men stood quietly examining the Garden. But Jason was disturbed and anxious, still confused by the hero's welcome and even more by his inability to understand the undercurrent of meaning Salizar, Muriel and Johnson were enjoying.

"Salizar, I tried to do what you said. To distinguish the true from the false but I couldn't do it. I can't do it. I haven't done anything on this whole trip. I don't know why everyone is so...why they think I..."

Salizar resumed his walk, "Only the world likes miracles and heroes. Forget the world. It is a web of deceit and lies."

"Right and wrong, is that deceit and lies?"

"We all must know right from wrong. But how do we know? How do we avoid the sea of gossip, opinions and fashion? Only by learning more of what is true do we know more of what is right, and gain a standard to live by. This is the genius of life."

Jason sighed. Whatever illusions there may be, he could not see through them.

Salizar waved his hand across the Garden: "It seems a great quest, this search for truth. Fortunately, we have beauty leading us there, showing us. That is its purpose. However mean and petty, everyone has their own sense of beauty, and regardless of how meager the beginnings, if we follow this beauty, it will lift us up and up, always improving our sense of it, until it leads us finally into all truth."

"Of course," thought Jason. "My beautiful Garden. That's why Johnson said I needed to work in the Garden."

While his moral sense was supposed to be like a sixth sense, it would fail him, perplexed as it was by his past and his circumstance. And his conscience was a willing but sometimes undependable guide, subject as it was to instinct. But his sense of beauty...here was a constant friend, a companion unconfused, unique, and peculiar to him.

In a rush of awareness, he realized these three people with him genuinely loved him. Johnson had tended the Garden for him. Muriel had helped him across the riverbed. Salizar had chosen the *Rivina*, Betsy's favorite flower. The jubilation and joy they were showing him was not coming because he had done them a favor, because he had completed a task, gotten the river flowing, or won their approval. It was coming from them because they lived in a giving, grateful, graceful state of mind so everything they embraced with this thought felt loved and lovely.

But it was the Garden that gave him the most, for in this Garden he saw the purpose of his journey. Each of these lovely plants had grown from a seed utterly unlike what was on display now, a seed, if held in the hand, that shows nothing of its promise, yet contains all it needs for its full and final expression. In his journey he had not gained or lost, yet his own enclosing and frightened sense of existence had been surely replaced. Successive stages of existence brought him greater insight and more power not because of a mighty effort on his part but because of the way he was made, wonderfully and complete. He was growing now as he was intended, not as cause but as effect. He heard and understood the first strains of the song so sweetly sung to him by his friends. Whatever had created him, created them, and cared for all like a gardener for flowers. In the Garden, from bud to blossom, the flowers grew, not by gathering but by becoming.

He looked out across the hills. They were alive with color. He saw Johnson's house in the distance...and next to it another, and another. He looked across the valley floor and saw hundreds of houses and people about their day.

As the four of them strolled through the garden, Muriel took Jason's hand. They approached the small bridge over the pond and Jason looked back towards his cabin. The flower garden lying before it looked as if it was supporting the house, causing it to float on a field of flowers.

They walked on to the small bridge and looked down into the lilies and the water and, for the first time, Jason saw his reflection. He had a shock of red hair and was covered with freckles. This startled him and he laughed, his bright green eyes flashing in the sunlight.

Jason gazed all about the garden with its hundreds of delicate and beautiful plants.

"Johnson, this is splendid," he said.

"I'll say," said Johnson.

A sudden weight came into Jason's thoughts.

"Will I be able to keep it like this?" he asked Johnson.

"Sure," said Johnson. "I'll help. I'm your neighbor. I'll come and help out. Besides...see anything different?"

Johnson patted Jason's pocket making the small branch rustle against the cloth. Jason pulled it from his pocket and studied it closely. It was not glowing, no light came from it. The glow he had first seen, when Johnson had broken the twig from the bush, was not there. He looked out across the Garden. Everything was lustrous, nothing was glowing.

"It's not glowing," said Jason.

"Well...remember when you asked me, 'How does this little twig here glow?' "

Salizar said, "In the room the women come and go, wondering why the gardens glow." And then he laughed.

Jason nodded.

"The answer is...it doesn't. The twig looked like it was glowing to you because you hadn't seen the life of it. Once you see the life, it all glows, so none of it glows, if you see what I mean."

Johnson was right. The luminous garden was perfectly natural in its beauty, shining, but in no extraordinary way.

"I was gonna say 'it doesn't glow'

when you asked but...you were pretty unhappy, so I didn't. Anyway, now that you see it you'll be able to keep it up fine. There's not much to do except water it."

"Well, I have to weed it and plant and..."

"No, no, no," said Johnson."There are no weeds. Let it all grow. You know how to turn the water off and on. Water only what you want more of."

"Does that mean I have to go back to the Spring every time I want water?" Jason asked.

"Every time," said Muriel. "But it gets easier, every time. Even this trip wasn't hard."

"No, I guess not. I didn't do anything but go. Although I couldn't have done it without you all. Especially you." The last remark was directed at Muriel.

"Then I'll always go," she said.

A gratitude welled in Jason, a gratitude that was a reflection of their joy of giving. Salizar and Johnson strolled away leaving Muriel and Jason standing on the bridge, the two of them looking into the peaceful, reflecting water, Muriel's dark form and black hair mingling with Jason's red hair and the white and red lilies.

"I'll stay here with you if you'd like," Muriel said after a moment.

Jason felt his heart rise. He loved Muriel but after the incident in the town he pushed this feeling down. He wanted Muriel to stay but what did that mean? How would love be shared?

"I'd like that very much. But in the City you said it wasn't possible," he said at last.

"People express love in many ways. To be shared it must be given freely."

Jason knew at that moment Muriel would stay. She was talking to him of pure love. He had known this selfless love before when he had left Marie and the Prison behind. Then he had found pure love conquering his sadness. Here it was bringing him a friend. Jason was no longer lonely. The glancing sunlight from the garden caught Jason's thought. He was certainly no longer bored. Muriel and Jason looked deep into the reflecting water as ripples from a fallen leaf merged the two glistening images in a serene and perfect picture.